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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [EAGR](#) [MASS](#) [PA](#)

SUBJECT: EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE POURS IN TO DAMPEN FIRE
DISASTER

REF: ASUNCION 765

1. (U) SUMMARY: The Duarte administration declared a state of national emergency September 12 in response to the worst fire disaster in Paraguayan history -- three weeks after the fires started -- and provided limited emergency relief to affected areas. An OFDA expert monitored the fires by air and advised that 5,800 fires could consume over 600,000 hectares of land in Concepcion, San Pedro, Amambay, and Canindeyu departments. The fires have devastated the lives of many campesinos, whose homes, crops, and farm animals were destroyed by fire. The Embassy provided over USD 400,000 in total USG emergency assistance through multiple agencies to assist firefighters and fire victims. The USG ramped up emergency assistance to augment previous fire prevention efforts, the Brazilians provided aerial support over the past two weeks, and the Venezuelans launched their support efforts with much fanfare and little effect. The USG's efforts played well in the local media, and the Embassy will continue to assist firefighters and fire victims in the aftermath of the fire disaster. END SUMMARY.

FIRE FUELED BY INACTION

2. (SBU) The Duarte administration declared a state of national emergency September 13 in response to the worst fire disaster in Paraguayan history -- three weeks after the fires started -- and provided limited emergency relief to affected areas. President Duarte and the National Emergency Secretariat (SEN) Minister Jose Key Kanazawa flew to affected

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areas September 15 to assess the situation. The SEN deployed 120 national firefighters and 500 members of the Armed Forces to combat the fires and furnished limited food, water, and supplies to firefighters and fire victims. Approximately 400 local firefighters, including volunteers and police officers, combated fires in affected areas. Despite these efforts, Paraguay remains ill-equipped to fight fires of sizable magnitude, and firefighters lack the clothing and equipment needed to combat them. Their efforts have also been hampered by firefighter shortages, desertions, and insufficient logistical support.

3. (U) OFDA Fires Consultant Maria Luisa Alfaro, who arrived at post several days before the Government declared a disaster and extensively monitored the fires by air, advised the Paraguayan government and the Embassy that the 5,800 fires burning could consume over 600,000 hectares of land in Concepcion, San Pedro, Amambay, and Canindeyu departments. Paraguayan officials estimated that the fires could burn over one million hectares of land and displace over 200,000

people. PolOff toured affected areas in Concepcion and San Pedro departments by vehicle September 16 and noted widespread fire damage. The administration responded to the situation as it has during past fire seasons -- letting them burn themselves out. However, a severe five-month drought created tinderbox conditions that contributed to the fire disaster. Although the Paraguayan government claimed that slash-and-burn techniques, pyromania, and unextinguished cigarettes caused the fires. Some ruling party politicians including Ministers, ludicrously suggested that opponents of the government - especially those tied to Monsignor Lugo - started the fires as a campaign of "destabilization".

¶4. (SBU) The fires have devastated the lives of many campesinos, whose homes, crops, and farm animals were destroyed by fire. The media reported two fire-related fatalities, including a 40-year-old rancher and an 11-year-old boy. Concepcion Emergency Response Director Sixto Ruiz Diaz and Fire Chief Francisco Antogni told PolOff September 16 that the fires had severely affected many campesinos, displacing over 25,750 in Concepcion Department alone, but that large-scale ranches in San Pedro were relatively unaffected. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Attache Fernando Allo and Brazilian Forest Service Coordinator Alex Peroto confirmed that ranch owners had effectively halted nearby fires by coordinating efforts with local officials. They noted that Marys Llorens, owner of a major ranch in San Pedro, donated gasoline to fuel firefighting aircraft in exchange for protecting local ranches from the disaster.

INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE EFFORTS

¶5. (U) The Embassy provided over USD 400,000 in total USG emergency assistance through multiple agencies to assist firefighters and fire victims. The Ambassador designated USD

50,000 in OFDA emergency assistance funds to the Paraguayan Red Cross for fire victims' assistance and USD 50,000 in OFDA assistance to local NGO Moises Bertoni Foundation to purchase firefighting equipment. DOD allocated five tranches of aid in USD 10,000 installments to purchase firefighting equipment, medicines, and hygiene products. USAID will provide up to USD 250,000 in assistance to firefighters and fire victims, including firefighting clothing worth USD 83,000 it donated in February. (Reftel notes additional aid provided by USAID.) In response to the Concepcion governor's assistance request, Embassy staff personally delivered on September 15th some USD 20,000 in fire equipment and supplies, (purchased with DOD emergency assistance funds over the weekend) to the towns of Concepcion, Horqueta, and Yby Ya'u. The Paraguayan-American Chamber of Commerce also initiated efforts to relieve fire victims in San Pedro Department.

¶6. (SBU) The USG ramped up emergency assistance to augment previous fire prevention efforts, the Brazilians provided aerial support over the past two weeks, and the Venezuelans launched their support efforts September 12 with much fanfare and little effect. Brazil provided five small airplanes equipped with 1,800-3,000 liter water tanks, one reconnaissance plane, and pilots to fight fires in Concepcion and San Pedro. Venezuelan President Chavez pledged USD 1 million September 12 to rent an Ilyushin-76 super hydrant aircraft from Russia and donated USD 1 million more September 14 to the Paraguayan government to pay for fire-related expenses. Venezuela also sent in two hydrant helicopters equipped with 2,000 liter water tanks and military support personnel to Concepcion September 16 to help fight the fires.

(NOTE: While the announcement of Venezuela's super hydrant aircraft made headlines, it has yet to arrive, and fire officials in Concepcion told PolOff they were skeptical the plane would ever see action. The press reported that American contractor Tom Robinson has been coordinating local emergency assistance efforts on behalf of Venezuela and/or Russia. END NOTE.)

PARAGUAYAN EXPRESS GRATITUDE

¶17. (U) The USG's efforts played well in the local media. National and local media broadcast highlights from the Embassy's visit to Concepcion September 17 and noted our efforts to aid the Paraguayan people. Many local officials and residents of Concepcion thanked the Embassy for its efforts and expressed gratitude to the United States for its generosity. More public turnover events are planned.

COMMENT

¶18. (SBU) COMMENT: The Embassy will continue to assist firefighters and fire victims in the aftermath of the disaster. Emergency response coordinators and fire chiefs noted that the national government does not have an effective disaster response plan, and the government's course of action during this emergency involved soliciting donations and waiting for the fires to burn themselves out. The Embassy will engage the Paraguayan government to help develop an emergency disaster plan. Post remains extremely appreciative of inter-agency backstopping and support provided - starting with the hands-on expertise of OFDA's Maria Luisa Alfaro. END COMMENT.

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Fitzpatrick